

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria**

Kangaroo Flat—Tuesday, 30 March 2021

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

#### **WITNESS**

Name withheld.

**WITNESS**

Name withheld.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just again thank you for being here. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to elders past and present and any Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. I declare open the public hearing of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

I welcome [name withheld] here today. As I said, all evidence taken is protected by the Committee under parliamentary privilege, so anything you say here today will be protected but if you say things outside, particularly on social media and other platforms, the evidence may not be protected.

All evidence is also recorded by Hansard to my left. You will receive a transcript to check over after your evidence when it is available unless confidentiality is requested. We also have Holly who is here today. She is available providing psychological services and support, whether that is during the evidence or after. Please know this and reach out.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I am a very emotional person. I just warn you in advance.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right. I will introduce the Committee members. To my left is Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong. You may now begin sharing your story. Thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Okay. My name is [name withheld]. I am nearly 41. My father was adopted. My mum and dad separated when I was five. For the first five years of my life he was a very, very, very violent man. I watched him beat the crap out of my mum basically every day, and this is not stuff that my mum has told me. Mum never spoke about it after the separation. It is stuff that I remember, so I remember things like getting locked out of the house and my father in there smashing the house up, and we could never understand why he was always so angry. He was always such an angry man, to the point where he even held a gun to Mum's head once.

Mum's family lives in Bendigo, so one Easter—it was about this time—many years ago we came up to visit family, and when we went home, he was gone, so even just in the way he left it was very detrimental. Basically we went home expecting to be there with Dad, and Mum had to tell the four of us he was gone. We did not know where he had gone, so Mum packed up and we came to Bendigo. That was probably one of the best things she did, getting away from that, but then it led on to other issues. She met another man who sexually abused me and my sister. It is a whole other story. But basically just the four of us have grown up without our father.

Working in the industry I work in—I work in early childhood—I have touched a lot on the stolen generation. I have done my own research and looked into the forced adoptions, and it gave me some understanding as to why my father was such an angry man and why we cannot have those attachments due to his brain development. Life has been very hard not having a dad. My little brother still has issues. He spent some time in prison. He had drug issues. My older sister has gone into an abusive relationship herself. Me and my older brother have pretty much broken the cycle and we have come out on the other side, but there is still so much. We have done this with no support—nothing. We have done it all on our own, because we did not know what support was out there, basically.

I do not really know what else to say other than the fact that we have never had a relationship with our father. He hated women—hated women. I think a lot of that was to do with—his first mum gave him away. Then the mother that adopted him passed away, so my grandfather married Nanna and then they went on to have their own biological children. So he was always the outcast of the family. He married my mum at 18 or 19 and had children straightaway, and it was not a good combination. My siblings suffer greatly still from not having a father, basically.

I can honestly say—I only have one child, and the biggest thing in having a child was, 'I need to make sure he's a good father', so I waited seven years before we had a child just so I knew he was going to stick around. But even when I first met my husband, I thought he was going to hit me. That is what men do, you know. So I push

and push and push, and I am just really lucky that I met a good man—very, very lucky, whereas my other sister was not quite as lucky. As I said, it led on to a lot of other things like sexual abuse. I have been involved in a car chase with another stepfather where he tried to run us off the road and kill us. I have pretty much been through the wringer. But that is okay; I have come out on the other side, and I know you can come out on the other side, but some people cannot.

At work, as I said, I touch a lot on the stolen generation, and that is sort of what got me thinking. I was like, ‘Well, this is my life, but I’m not Indigenous’, but I do not know. That is the thing as well—not knowing where you come from. It really affects you—like, massive anxiety. Sitting here now I could just—it is hard. I think being born into that situation already sets you up for the path you are going to take, and I understand that is because of brain development. As I said, my little brother was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of I think six—but now knowing that comes from trauma. I do not really know what else to say now.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, [name withheld], and thank you for sharing your courageous experience, your life experience, with us today. Really just being here means a lot to us.

**NAME WITHHELD:** And everything that is happening in the Parliament at the moment—I do not know if this is the right time to say it—

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**NAME WITHHELD:** but that is a massive trigger—a massive trigger.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, of course it is.

**NAME WITHHELD:** As a woman in this world, working in a women’s industry, I am out. I have already decided now that I will not continue in this industry. I am looking at studying and moving out of there because we feel so unsupported. You know, it is child care. It is very triggering to read these things and think, ‘Who’s advocating for us? Where’s our support?’. I think with everything I have gone through, I am used to it, and I should not have to feel that way. So that is why I have decided that, ‘No, I’m better than this. I’m stepping out of that industry to step into an industry where I am going to be paid better and maybe looked after better’.

**The CHAIR:** That is right, absolutely.

**NAME WITHHELD:** But it all connects, it is all that—

**The CHAIR:** And it is all connecting, absolutely. It does, and you are right, you know. It is a trigger, isn’t it, when you—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Massively, like just before—

**The CHAIR:** Recent events, that does—

**NAME WITHHELD:** I read an article about someone taking photos under someone’s skirt.

**The CHAIR:** Of course.

**NAME WITHHELD:** And as a mother of a 15-year-old daughter, where do I tell her to head? Which industry do I tell her to go into? But then on the other hand I had an aunty who was the CEO of Wormwood company 40 years ago. So that is the sort of women in my family, and that is why I know that I will get through this, but how, that is—

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely. You need the support. I mean, you have already gone through, clearly, pretty unimaginable and tough and—

**NAME WITHHELD:** And I have let it affect the first half of my life.

**The CHAIR:** Exactly.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I am not letting it affect the second half of my life, and that is why I am here today, because if it can help any other children in the same situation—

**The CHAIR:** That is right, and I am sure you can. Sorry, questions.

**Ms COUZENS:** Can I?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks so much, [name withheld], for coming and sharing your experience today, and for me it reflects the generational trauma that we have not heard a lot about so far. We have heard a little bit, but it is really valuable. So I want to thank you for your time today. I just had a question: have you had any contact with your father since?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I spoke to him yesterday.

**Ms COUZENS:** Oh, okay.

**NAME WITHHELD:** I actually spoke to him yesterday. He is on his deathbed now. He is dying, so that is why I made the decision, 'I need to contact him', and because I feel, my mum and dad's relationship, I have carried a lot of that. That is not my problem, and I think that is a lot of the issue as well: as children we carry our parents' problems. And, no, that is not my baggage to carry anymore. I should not be making choices based on my mum and dad; I need to make choices based on me. But it is just a matter of getting to that, you know.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. And having the experience that you have, is there anything—and I do not want to put you on the spot, but I am just sort of interested to know if there is anything—that you can identify that could be included in our recommendations around—

**NAME WITHHELD:** Trauma.

**Ms COUZENS:** Trauma?

**NAME WITHHELD:** Trauma. Everyone—and it does not matter what industry you work in—needs to have some sort of training on trauma, because what I think of trauma to what someone else might think of trauma could be totally different. A lot of people look at trauma as sexual abuse, emotional abuse, that type of thing, but trauma can come from parents separating, a dog dying. I think that everyone should have a bit of an understanding as to where trauma can come from.

**Ms COUZENS:** So that specialised counselling—

**NAME WITHHELD:** And how trauma can affect brain development as well, because trauma really affects brain development. Like, I know now, as I am getting older, little bits and pieces are still—I know there is a lot shut away that I have blocked away, that I do not want to bring out. But it is going to happen, so that is why I am like, 'So where do I go with that?'.

**Ms COUZENS:** So have you had any counselling yourself?

**NAME WITHHELD:** No, never.

**Ms COUZENS:** And would you seek that out at some point?

**NAME WITHHELD:** I am in the process at the moment, because I do want to step into a different industry. I want to get into the community service side of things, so I am in the process at the moment of working on my high-functioning anxiety with my GP, and then we will go from there.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, [name withheld]. I really appreciate what you have told me today.

**NAME WITHHELD:** That is okay. I cannot believe I am not crying.

**The CHAIR:** That concludes the questions. But again on behalf of the committee, thank you for being here today. We truly appreciate it.

**NAME WITHHELD:** No worries at all.

**The CHAIR:** And we have had a different perspective to the ones that we have already heard. So thank you. That has been really, really helpful.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Another thing, too, my dad mentioned to me yesterday. I asked him if he has ever received his birth certificate. He does not even know his biological father's name. So that is hard as well. I do not even know where to begin, so I would love to tell my daughter where I come from, and I cannot. And being in Australia and being such a multicultural country, you know, you would like to embrace all culture. So if I have got something in me, you know, let us embrace that. And I do, I feel such a connection to the Indigenous side of things, and I do not know why.

**Ms COUZENS:** Well, you don't know.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Exactly. That is exactly it. I do not know why, and I am missing out on opportunities.

**The CHAIR:** Well, we will be deliberating on all the evidence, and our job will be to table a very strong report back to the Victorian Government before 1 July and include a whole lot of recommendations on behalf of the Committee—what we recommend back. And hopefully we do see change, because you are not just a story. You have shared your experiences, and as I said, we truly appreciate that. It has been courageous, and so good on you for that.

**NAME WITHHELD:** It is. And it is the way it all worked as well. Like, I contacted my dad last week. I saw this advertised on Facebook, and then I called Yuki yesterday. So this has all been—

**Ms COUZENS:** It is meant to be.

**The CHAIR:** Exactly. Meant to be, that is right. So at any point you can reach out to any one of us but in particular our secretariat—Yuki—to keep up to date.

**NAME WITHHELD:** In the industry we work in, like I was saying before, we do so much. Like, at the moment I look after three children who are at risk. I was talking about attachment and things like that, but we have no support. You know, we are just babysitters. We need to be looked at as more than what we are, basically, because we do a lot of, like I said, that brain development stuff, that trauma, but we do not have the extra funding and support or the wage.

**The CHAIR:** We will take that on board. Heang—yes, a comment?

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, [name withheld]. I just would like to maybe say off record—it is not related to this inquiry—I am very sorry to hear that you want to leave early childhood education, actually. We just had an inquiry about these things that we are hoping to achieve to the point—

**NAME WITHHELD:** I know. And I have seen—the big roles, little lives. Fix what is already broken; do not bring more in. Like, okay, I start work at 6 o'clock in the morning. Do you know how hard it is to get staff to come to work? Then to have JobKeeper taken off us, first off. And, like, schools closed down. We did not. We did not get any extra anything, and I can tell you at my centre we only had cleaners three days a week. So who does the extra cleaning? We do. We do so much, and then we provide a curriculum as well that is under the same framework as a kindergarten, but our pay rate is half.

I love child care—love my job, love my team, love my boss—but I feel worthless in the industry because I want to keep going, but there is no incentive for me to keep going, which is really sad. And there are a lot like me out there as well that are feeling the same way, and that is why we struggle to get people in the industry or it is used as a gateway industry. They use it to get into nursing or something because their ATAR was not high enough. So they go and do a certificate, which the government pays for, and then they use that to go into uni and go down a different career. And I have been in early childhood for 10 years.

**Mr TAK:** That is all, Chair. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. We have strayed a bit, but we have taken that on board as well.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Sorry. I am glad I got all of that out there though. I never get to tell anyone this stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. So we might also provide the local member's details, so you can get in contact on some of those other issues. But again, [name withheld], all the very best.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Thanks for having me.

**The CHAIR:** No. Thank you for being here. It is really important to us. So, as I said, 1 July we will be tabling the report, and we will be providing you with some advice beforehand. Thank you.

**NAME WITHHELD:** Lovely. Thank you so much.

**The CHAIR:** Take care. Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**